
the g-spot

The Theatre of Cleaning

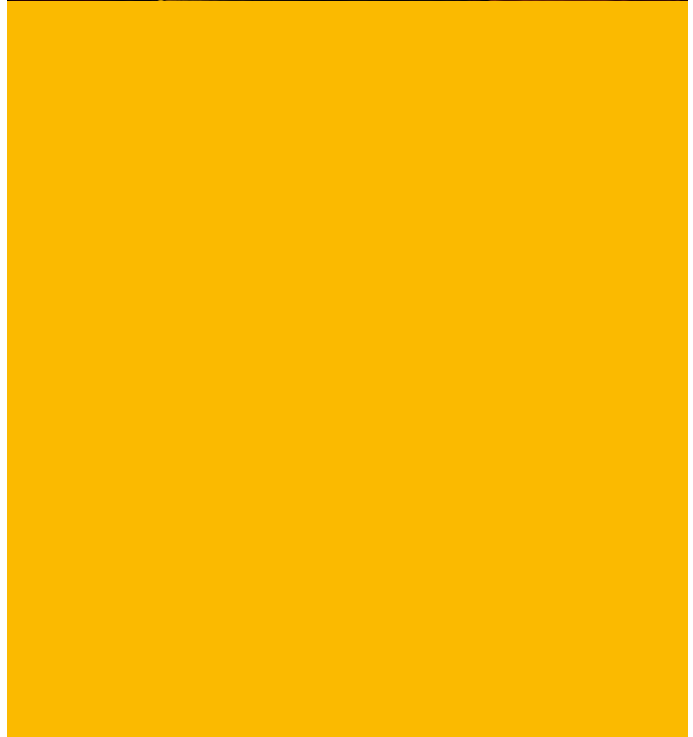
Why cleaning deserves a starring role in your customer experience

By Gillian James

In 2020, in the height of Covid, The Atlantic magazine introduced the idea of "hygiene theatre". They didn't mean it as a compliment, using it instead as a way to describe much of what organisations were doing in the name of Covid cleanliness, spraying surfaces that posed no real risk, wiping down objects that didn't need wiping or installing hand sanitiser stations that nobody used. Activities that The Atlantic deemed to be performative rather than for protection.

But I'm here to reclaim that phrase. I don't think it should be pejorative at all.

Because I like to think there is something powerful about the performance and the "theatre" of cleaning that many organisations often miss.



I might spend a little too much time in bars (don't judge me) and honestly, when I'm sipping my martini, there is something rather mesmerising about watching a bartender holding a glass to the light and turning it slowly, working a cloth into the base with the unhurried attention of someone who actually cares whether it gleams... Sigh... Sorry, where was I...

This performance makes me feel something better about being in that bar. And yet it is something most organisations actively hide.

I blame Herzberg

I think there is a reason so many organisations underestimate the power of cleaning and his name is Herzberg. Frederick Herzberg first coined the term "hygiene factors" in his 1959 work *The Motivation to Work*. He was actually writing about workplace motivation and his list covered things like salary, supervision and working conditions: elements that, when poor, cause dissatisfaction but which don't actively generate satisfaction when present.

He wasn't necessarily wrong, but the label migrated into customer experience thinking over subsequent decades and cleanliness became one of these 'hygiene factors'.

But we have to admit there is some irony in the choice of the words and how they seem to be about 'baseline' whereas in the truer sense of the word,

hygiene describes practices essential to health and wellbeing: things we consider important and critical. Yet in the management shorthand, derived from Herzberg, hygiene has come to mean something closer to its opposite: a 'given', something that 'just happens' and certainly not worth the senior team's attention.

In a companion piece on safety (available [here](#)), we explored how some organisations have systematically undervalued how much customers care about feeling safe. Cleanliness sits in the same neglected column which would be a reasonable approach if customers had done the same. Spoiler... they haven't.

Why cleanliness matters more than the label suggests

The research on cleanliness and customer loyalty is consistent and has been building for some time. A 2024 hospitality study found that guests who rated cleanliness highly were 90% more likely to recommend a property and return, while properties that fell short saw a 45% decline in repeat visit intentions.

Cleanliness, in other words, is not a factor that influences a marginal segment of particularly fastidious customers. It is often a primary driver of whether people come back.

There is also something more fundamental happening beneath the surface, often quite literally. Research from the Journal of Environmental Psychology found that clean environments lower cortisol levels by up to 27% compared to cluttered or dirty spaces. Cortisol is the stress hormone. What this means in practical

terms is that a clean environment is not merely aesthetically preferable: it is physiologically calming. Your customers are not simply noticing the cleanliness. Their bodies are responding to it. I can relate to this and perhaps, like me, in times of stress, you are suddenly driven to a bout of spring cleaning.

Cleanliness, it turns out, doesn't just feel calming. It is calming, measurably and physiologically so.

Of course, we all became more conscious of cleanliness during Covid, and six years on, that consciousness has not faded as much as organisations seem to assume. Periodic public health scares, the Hantavirus cases being a recent example, bring it sharply back into focus particularly in public environments. The baseline has shifted, and it is unlikely to shift back.

Put it centre stage

Which brings us back to the theatre. Most organisations respond to the importance of cleanliness by making their cleaning as invisible as possible: scheduled for the margins of the day, completed before the audience arrives, tucked away as though it were something faintly embarrassing. The cleaner who appears during opening hours is sometimes treated as a sign that something has gone wrong with the schedule, that somehow the operation is ill-prepared.

I'd argue we've got this completely the wrong way round.

The visible act of cleaning is one of the most powerful signals an organisation can send. It says, without a word, that standards are actively being maintained, right now, in front of you. It is proof of the standard rather than a claim about it.

And customers, whether they consciously register it or not, respond to that proof very differently than they respond to a laminated hygiene certificate on the wall. There is real craft in cleaning done well, and it deserves to be seen. Think of the staff member in an exclusive restaurant meticulously using a crumb-scraper to 'set the scene' for the next course. It's integral to the experience not a side show.

Alongside visible cleaning, there is what I'd call the trace of care: the evidence that someone was here, even when you cannot see them now. The folded

point on a hotel bathroom toilet roll does no functional cleaning whatsoever. Its purpose is simply to say that someone was in this room and they paid attention. The individually signed cleaning rota on the wall of an airport toilet makes a system of care legible rather than assumed.

These small gestures are not trivial. They are the proof of the standard, left for the customer to discover.

Know where to clean, and how

In large environments, cleaning can feel like painting the Forth Road Bridge: a seemingly unending task where finishing one section means the beginning needs doing again. The honest reality is that you most likely cannot clean everything all the time. What you can do is understand precisely where cleanliness matters most to your customers and be uncompromising about those places specifically.

We worked with an airport client on exactly this question. Through a combination of customer observation and operational analysis, we identified that the single most important place to keep clean was where the traveler met solid ground. At that transition point, virtually every passenger looks down at their feet, prompted by the slight physical adjustment of stepping off a moving surface. If there is dirt caught in the traveler's teeth, they will see it. It had nothing to do with the area being particularly prominent. It was simply where the customer's eye reliably went.

Cleaning priority should follow the customer's gaze rather than operational instinct or habit.

Knowing where to direct the effort is only half of it. We worked with a value restaurant chain whose customers were consistently complaining about sticky menus. When we investigated, the issue was not indifference but inexperience: most of the young team members genuinely did not know how to clean a plastic menu properly. Rather than skipping the task, they were over-spraying with cleaning fluid and leaving residue on the surface. Their diligence was producing the opposite of the intended effect.

Knowing that cleanliness matters is not enough. Knowing how to deliver it has to be taught, not assumed.

Pride, purpose and who it's really for

Soichiro Honda, the legendary founder of Honda Motor Co., had a habit of stepping onto the factory floor and personally cleaning the toilets. When asked why, he told his employees: "If you can't keep the toilet clean, how can you build a clean engine?" Management parable or not, much can be learned from this.

As the comedian Peter Kay once put it, probably not for the first time: "If you have time to lean, you have time to clean." It gets a laugh because we all recognise the environment he's describing and the culture that Honda was trying to instil. Because the deeper point is not about who cleans, but rather that cleaning is not simply a designated activity, cordoned off to specific people at specific times. It is a continuous expression of standards, visible to everyone. The bartender polishing the glass is not doing the cleaner's job. It is an expression of their attention and care to the environment.

Cleanliness is a cultural signal about what an organisation notices, values and allows to slide.

The senior leader who walks past a piece of litter on the ground because the cleaner will "get to it later" is making a decision about culture, whether they know it or not.

But telling people that cleanliness matters is rarely enough on its own. The more powerful move is connecting people to the reason it matters, which

means connecting them to the customer they are doing it for.

Psychologist Adam Grant and researcher David Hofmann tested this directly in a hospital, published in *Psychological Science*. They placed two signs above soap and sanitiser dispensers. One read: "Hand hygiene prevents you from catching diseases." The other read: "Hand hygiene prevents patients from catching diseases." The personal warning produced no measurable change in behaviour. The patient-focused sign produced a 33% increase in soap and gel usage. Grant's conclusion was direct: "We should highlight the consequences for others, not only themselves."

We saw exactly this with a supermarket chain we worked with. Their core customer persona was a mother with two young children. We named her Frances, built an internal storytelling campaign around her life and what mattered to her, and then renamed the uniform standards 'Fit for Frances'. Clean nails, clean hair, clean uniform: not because the manual said so, but because Frances deserved it. This reframe, from procedural requirement to purposeful act of care, changed how people related to the standard entirely.

Tell your team to maintain standards and you will get variable compliance. Show them Frances, tell them her story, and you will get something closer to pride and commitment.

The Atlantic used hygiene theatre as a criticism, and in the context they were describing, it was a fair one.

But theatre, at its best, is not fakery. It is craft made visible. It is care performed with skill and intention in front of an audience that can tell the difference between the real thing and a poor imitation.

That is what cleaning can be. It's not just housekeeping's problem or the facilities manager's column in a spreadsheet. When taken seriously, it is a genuine expression of organisational pride, performed daily, in full view of the people it is meant to reassure.

Take action by

- Auditing where your customers' eyes actually go in your environment, not where you assume they look, and making those specific places non-negotiable. Then make sure the people responsible know not just that cleanliness matters, but how to deliver it.
- Bringing cleaning into view. Review when cleaning happens, who is seen doing it, and whether your environment leaves the trace of care that tells customers someone has been here and taken the work seriously. Visible industriousness is a signal. Use it.
- Giving your customers a name. Connect your people to the person they are cleaning for, not the standard they are meeting. When Frances walks through the door, she should be able to feel the difference. If she can't, the performance hasn't started yet.
- If this has got you thinking about the signals your organisation is sending, we'd love to talk. hello@signal.cx

That'll be all!

